Film Quarterly, The Straight Story

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The Straight Story.

By: Tim Kreider

Director: David Lynch. Producers: Mary Sweeney, Neal Edelstein. Writers: John

Roach, Sweeney. Cinematographer: Freddie Francis. Editor: Sweeney.

Production designer:Jack Fisk. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. Buena Vista.

The Straight Story begins a lot like a David Lynch film, specifically like Blue Velvet: first we see a dreamy montage of slow-motion scenes from a small-town, middle-American Eden (cinematographer Freddie Francis filling in for Norman Rockwell and composer Angelo Badalamenti for Aaron Copland), and then the camera drifts down to a neatly mown suburban yard. A fat woman with goggles and a tanning reflector is sunning herself on a lawn chair, blindly groping for Hostess Sno-balls on a nearby plate--a characteristically Lynchian figure, the Felliniesque grotesque next door. Nothing happens for a Lynchianly long time. The woman runs out of Sno-balls and gets up to go in for more. Because we know we are watching a David Lynch film, there is a certain expectant air--that ominous, low-register thrum of imminent catastrophe. Then we hear a cry and thud from inside--recalling the stroke that felled Jeffrey Beaumont's father and began Blue Velvet's dark adventure. And then, this being a David Lynch film, we await our inevitable descent into the black and crawly underbelly of this overbright world.

Which, as everyone by now knows, never happens. The most famous thing about The Straight Story is that it is rated G. (Who could have imagined, after seeing Blue Velvet in 1986, that we would ever see the credit "Walt Disney Pictures Presents a Film by David Lynch"?) It's been described by critics as sweet, simple, and sentimental; authentic, buccolic, and unironic. Its hero, Alvin Straight, is a genuinely good man, honest and direct, dispensing advice and helping folks when he can--a guy we can admire. And, even more incredibly, almost every character he encounters on his odyssey is also honest and friendly and helpful and just basically decent. There is none of the ugly sex and violence, the lurid, nightmarish surrealism, that lie at the heart of other David Lynch films. It appears, however amazingly, to be a film devoid of darkness or duplicity, without so much as a single cuss word.

Anthony Lane of The New Yorker dismissed The Straight Story as a "comic coda to Lost Highway." Although the film is clearly not comic at its heart, it does, like its predecessor, use one story to mask another, more sinister, one. Lost Highway's protagonist Fred represses all memory of having murdered his wife in a jealous rage; he only glimpses himself howling over her dismembered corpse on grainy videotape, and, in the film's second half, re-imagines his story as a pulpy film noir with himself as the unwitting dupe of his wife (reincarnated as a femme fatale)--instead of as the villain he truly is. (As he tells two detectives in the film's first half, "I like to remember things my own way.") Similarly, Alvin Straight never brings himself to tell the straight story of his own past; he tells, instead, incomplete and disguised versions of it to the strangers he meets, hears echoes of it in the stories they tell him, and sees distorted reenactments of it in one scene after another.

The real story of The Straight Story turns out not to be very straightforward at all, but involuted and hidden--buried, as in Lost Highway, within the ostensible narrative like a repressed memory. This movie is about how a mean drunk named Alvin Straight lost his daughter's children to the state because he let one of them get burned in a fire. This is the only way the film makes sense as a unified whole, as anything other than the meandering picaresque most reviewers thought it was. Alvin Straight is riding his mower with its wagon all those hundreds of miles along highway shoulders not on an errand of forgiveness, but as an ordeal of atonement. There is darkness here beneath the bright autumn colors, and evil concealed in Alvin's heart. There is the history of a family destroyed by alcoholism and abuse. There is fire and death.

Is this all really unexpected? The Straight Story is a David Lynch film, after all.

That a story is seldom truly "straight" is one of the defining insights of literary modernism; writers like James Joyce and Henry James took the unreliability of first-person narrators to new heights of self-consciousness and, sometimes, new depths of self-deception. And yet this mistrust of the ostensible "story," by now instinctive in reading literature, seems not to have penetrated criticism of the superficially more transparent medium of film. The title of David Lynch's latest is not just an obvious pun but a warning and a test; it warns us not to be deceived by appearances--in this case, by an ingenuous claim of forthrightness, a frank demeanor, or an honest face.

The story that Alvin tells of his own past, piece by piece, to the various people he meets is full of conspicuous gaps and contradictions. Take his story about his hard drinking: that he'd developed "a mournful taste for alcohol" during the war in France and became a mean drunk, but was helped to give up drinking by a preacher after he got home. Or his story about his daughter Rose: that she had four children, but that the state,

misinterpreting her speech (or neurological) impediment as evidence that she was an unfit mother, took them away when one of them was burned in a fire. Or Alvin's account of his falling-out with his brother Lyle: the one time he's directly asked what was at issue, he vaguely waves the question off ("anger ... vanity ..."). Or even his answering "I did" when Lyle, at the film's end, asks if he drove his mower "just to see" him. None of these stories is quite straight. In fact, none of them stands up to much scrutiny at all.

If Alvin gave up drinking shortly after his return from World War II, why did drink figure in the fight that estranged him from Lyle ten years ago? Why doesn't Rose at least get to visit her children, or talk to them? And why do we learn so little about Alvin's breach with his brother? The fact that the details of what is ostensibly the central conflict in the film are left so conspicuously blank suggests that we ought to ask what else the conflict might involve. What is the real reason Alvin's making this trip?

Alvin first tells a small part of his story to the pregnant runaway who shares his campfire. It's the story of what happened to Rose's children: "Someone else was supposed to be watchin' them, and there was a fire, and her second boy got burned real bad." Note the vague references --"someone else"--and passive constructions--"there was a fire" and "got burned." As he speaks, we see a series of dissolves from one allusive image of abandonment and emptiness to another: the bare yellow wall of Alvin and Rose's house with a flyswatter hanging from a nail; a child's ball rolling slowly down the sidewalk; Rose's wistful face reflected in the window glass; cigarette smoke curling in the air. Alvin shares this piece of his past to impress upon the girl how much her own family must miss her: "There's not a day goes by that she doesn't pine for those kids." But Alvin's story is only tangentially relevant to the girl's predicament. He's leaving something out.

Kenneth Turan of the L. A. Times calls Alvin "the Ann Landers of the Open Road," who "seems to know just how to solve the problems of the people, young and old, he meets by the side of the road." But the advice he gives the runaway has more to do with his own regrets and wishes than with her dilemma. Here's Richard Corliss's account, from Time, of the parable he offers her:

The old man tells her that he used to give each of his kids a stick and say, "You break that." Of course they could. Then he'd tell them to tie some sticks in a bundle and try to break that. And they couldn't. "Then I'd say, `That bundle--that's a family.'" The next morning, the old man wakes up to find the girl gone, with the hint that she'll be returning home. On the ground is a bundle of sticks with a bow tied around it.

Well, this is nice. But it should be pointed out that Alvin's quaint metaphor for strength through unity, the bundle of sticks tied together, is not his own invention. The "fasces," a bound bundle of rods containing an ax with the blade protruding forward, was an object

borne ceremonially before Roman magistrates as an emblem of imperial power. The term "fascism" is derived from this emblem, a symbol of invincible strength through monolithic solidarity and submission to a single will-typically that of a tyrannical patriarch who ends up getting people killed. Even if you tie a pretty bow around that, it's still ugly.

But, more explicitly, this scene is also an allusion to Ran, Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy of a senescent patriarch and warrior. Hidetora, the Great Lord of the Ichimonji clan, uses exactly the same demonstration to instruct his three sons in the value of filial unity: he gives them each an arrow to break, which they do easily, and then challenges them to try to break a bundle of three arrows. Except that Hidetora's youngest son angrily smashes the bundle across his knee and calls his father on his blatant hypocrisy. "You've spilled an ocean of blood," he cries. "You showed no mercy, no pity. We, too, are children of this age, weaned on strife and blood. We are your sons, yet you count on our fidelity--in our eyes, that makes you a fool, a senile old fool." Alvin Straight, unlike Hidetora, goes unchallenged when he mouths platitudes about loyalty and peace that are utterly at odds with his own history of violence and betrayal.

Alvin's performance as patriarch of his own clan doesn't seem to have matched his rhetoric about the unbreakability of the family bond. His own family has been sundered. He hasn't spoken to his brother for ten years. His daughter Rose's children have been taken from her. The rest of his children, like Hidetora's, don't seem to have taken the lesson of the stick-breaking game straight to heart; there's no evidence of any contact between Alvin and any of Rose's six surviving siblings. (We overhear Rose on the phone discussing Alvin and Lyle's feud with someone, possibly a family member, but Alvin himself stays off the line.) Where has all his family gone? Dispersed across the country, like so many American families--or driven apart, like the Ichimonji brothers, by the divisive example of their father's cruelty?

It does not seem like too broad a generalization to say that families in David Lynch films are not happy families. They are more likely to be incestuous and violent, twisted or torn apart by repressed memories and unspeakable secrets: Fred in Lost Highway murders his wife; Marietta Pace in Wild at Heart is complicit in her husband's death and tries to seduce her daughter's boyfriend; Leland Palmer molests and kills his daughter Laura in Twin Peaks; in Blue Velvet Frank Booth obviously (and Jeffrey Beaumont, less obviously) has basic Oedipal issues to work through. And let it suffice to say of Eraserhead that Henry Spencer's dinner with his girlfriend Mary's family, the Xes, is among the least pleasant of all the strained and unpleasant family dinner scenes ever filmed (possibly excepting the one in Fire Walk with Me), and that the nuclear family unit formed by Henry and Mary and their infant is also less than traditionally strong and nurturing. Given all that, we would be willing marks if we weren't skeptical about any family-values platitudes uttered by one of

Lynch's characters, or suspicious of a Lynchian family that didn't conceal an internecine crime at its heart.

David Lynch tells the ugly truth in The Straight Story not in words but in images, powerfully suggestive visual metaphors. In the film's only scene of genuine action or suspense, Alvin Straight almost loses control of his makeshift mower/wagon coming downhill into a small town where the local fire department is conducting a training exercise on a burning abandoned house. As the old man desperately brakes and grapples with the wheel, hurtling faster and faster downhill, out of control, the camera cuts back and forth in a blur between his frantic face and the blazing house nearby. The high scream of the mower's overstrained engine and the engulfing roar of the fire become one terrifying noise. Anthony Lane shrugs this scene off as one of Lynch's "bursts of calculated strangeness"--those irrepressibly wacky trademark idiosyncrasies popping up again in a film where they're only distracting. But this burning house is not just a surreal non sequitur; it's one of the central images in the film. This scene functions as a flashback to the earlier fire, the one in which Alvin's grandchildren were burned. Alvin's face, bathed in sweat and flickering orange with firelight, and his eyes, bulging and rolling in his head like a frightened animal's, express a terror that transcends his immediate situation. When intercut with those quick, jarring shots of the blazing house, the real object of that terror is unmistakable. Alvin is the unnamed "someone" who was supposed to be watching Rose's kids. He let his grandson get burned. He caused his daughter's children to be taken away by the state. After he manages to stop his tractor, he sits panting and shaking in terror, stating at nothing, the burning house clearly framed in the background. He is trembling not just in reaction to his near-accident, but in an abreaction to that original trauma--another time when Alvin Straight lost control and events took on their own scary, unstoppable momentum.

This underlying, untold story makes sense of his whole journey, uniting episodes that have no other narrative connection and nothing else in common: the burning house, a woman hitting a deer on a highway, war stories told in a bar. These seemingly random meetings and tangential tales--Lynch's "bursts of calculated strangeness"--are all integral, each one another clue to the straight story. The situations Alvin encounters are reiterations of his own crimes and failures, confrontations with his own denial.

The driver hitting the deer is no self-indulgent directorial digression but a crucial episode. Again, as in the scene of the burning house, the camera focuses on Alvin's reaction, zooming in on his face in an almost subliminally rapid, staccato succession of increasingly close shots as he witnesses the offscreen accident that we only hear. Again, his horror is not just reaction but abreaction; he's hearing an echo of his own accident. Alvin pulls out his canes and hobbles up to a car that has slaughtered a deer in the road, and finds the

driver hysterical, weeping and shrieking. She's tried everything, she explains--honking the horn, rolling down the window and banging her hand on the door, even playing Public Enemy real loud. That's thirteen deer she's hit in the last seven weeks. "And I love deer!" she blurts out before getting disgustedly back into her car and peeling out.

This is a strange episode, its absurdist comedy seeming false and hollow in contrast to the bleakness of the surrounding landscape and the ceaseless sound of the wind ruffling through the dry grass. This driver isn't telling a straight story, either. Although she rails against the perverse luck that keeps throwing sacrificial victims at her, her killing streak is her own fault. Sure, deer do have a regrettable way of jumping in front of cars on country back roads--but thirteen in seven weeks? During the daytime? That's more than bad luck. The fact is, she was driving way too fast; her car veered around Alvin's rig just as he was riding by a NO PASSING ZONE sign. The reason she keeps hitting deer is that she's a reckless driven "Where do they come from?" she demands, looking helplessly out at the few sparse, bare trees in the landscape. But these deaths aren't being visited upon her by any cruel, arbitrary fate. She is Alvin's counterpart in her continuing inability to take responsibility for the terrible (and not unpredictable) consequences of a heedless urgency. After she screeches out of sight, there is a long, mournful shot of Alvin standing there in the road, thoughtfully nudging the deer's limp head with the toe of his boot.

In the very next shot we see him that evening cooking venison over his fire, glancing uneasily over his shoulder at an inexplicable herd of statues of deer who seem to be watching him. This is not just a cheap sight gag; these stolidly haunting presences represent the accusing memory of his human victims. Although there are about a dozen statues in the field, the shot when Alvin looks back at them is framed so that we see four of them "staring" at him; Rose, we'll remember, had four children. In the next scene, the deer's antlers have been mounted like a hood ornament on the front of his rig, where they remain visible for the rest of the film. They're particularly prominent in the frame after he's almost lost control near the burning house.

Animal trophies figure prominently in Lynch's work as symbols of casual human violence. Scarcely an interior in Twin Peaks is without a stuffed carcass; the whole town is densely populated by the hunted and mounted. The series' preoccupation with the fierce passions that possess parents and claim their children as victims leaves little doubt as to the meaning of so much taxidermy: it symbolizes human hungers, both carnivorous and carnal. Alvin Straight, from what we can see, is exclusively carnivorous, subsisting solely on processed meat products. And as for carnality, he did father fourteen children--about as many deer as that woman's killed in the last few weeks. Most likely, it was another of Alvin's appetites--his "taste for liquor"--that got his grandson burned. The antlers are a token of his past sins and a symbol of his new penitence. (It's not incidental, either, that

the lawnmower he needs to make his journey is a John Deere, its logo the silhouette of a rampant buck.) Alvin's trophy alludes to that same central disaster--an innocent creature harmed by the carelessness of someone who claimed to love it, who couldn't understand why this sort of thing kept happening to him.

Yes, kept happening--because, as we learn later, that fire wasn't the first time Alvin was at fault in a tragedy. Sitting in a bar with another old veteran, Alvin reveals that as a sniper in the war he accidentally shot and killed one of his own men, a Polish kid from Milwaukee named Kotz. Artists have often used pastoral settings to disguise commentaries on the corruption and betrayals of civil life (sometimes, most famously in Virgil's Eclogues, on the troubled fates of aged soldiers). In a pre-millennial year that saw more than its share of triumphalist rhetoric about the "painful but necessary job well done," David Lynch shows us memories of the Second World War which refuse to paper over the disillusionments of the postwar period. For Alvin, "homed" to rural Laurens, Iowa, what followed was a lifetime of secret remorse that expressed itself in drunkenness and cruelty, eventually estranging him from his family. The original trauma, an honest but fatal mistake, brought on the hard drinking that led to later, less forgivable, lapses of judgment.

Even the war stories these two old vets swap refer back to the unspoken story of the film--the fire. The tale the other vet tells is about all his buddies being killed, burned alive, by an incendiary bomb. We actually hear the explosion as he remembers, faint with the distance of decades--another echo of Alvin's own catastrophe. It is significant that the story Alvin does bring himself to share in response is a confession of long-repressed guilt, especially that he describes the man he killed as "a little fella." Groping to find a way to begin, he awkwardly repeats the phrase, emphasizing it--"He was a little fella,"--as though it explains what he's really trying to convey. (We shouldn't forget Alvin's horrified memory of the German adolescents--"moon-faced boys"--it was his job to kill.) Though harrowing enough, even this story is an evasion, another disguised allusion to his own grandchild, "a little fella" whose side Alvin was supposed to be on, someone else he was supposed to be watching out for, another one of his own whom he hurt without meaning to.

In this same scene, Alvin admits that he came back from the war an alcoholic. "I was mean," he says. But, he says, a minister helped him "put some distance between [him]self and the bottle," as though he had gone on the wagon a long time ago. Later, however, talking to a priest in a cemetery, he acknowledges that liquor was a catalyst in his falling out with Lyle. The apparent inconsistency between these two stories makes us wonder what really occasioned Alvin's reform. The clearest glimpse we ever get of the man Alvin Straight has been all his life--quick-tempered, impulsive, and violent--is after he's been brought back from his first, failed attempt to leave town. He deliberately fetches his shotgun, takes it out in back of his house, aims, and executes his old, broken-down

mower--which explodes into flames.

Images of fire recur throughout Lynch's films: a desert cabin implodes in a fiery cloud in Lost Highway; in Blue Velvet the monstrous image of Jeffrey smacking Dorothy Vallens dissolves in a sheet of fire; billowing flames flu the credits and gigantic flaring match heads punctuate the scenes of Wild at Heart. Also in Wild at Heart, Lula is never quite told the straight story about the fire that killed her father, the memory of which still makes her shudder: It was deliberately set by her mother's lover, Santos. It's already been intimated that there was more to the fire in The Straight Story than Alvin lets on. We see fire again and again in the film, not only in the conflagrations of the house and mower but in domesticated forms--in the campfires he builds every night, in the bonfire at the bikers' camp, and, of course, in the glowing ends of his cherished cigars. Isn't it implied that Alvin may have set the fire, passing out with a lighted Swisher Sweet, that burned his daughter's child?

The straight story of Alvin's life would seem to have gone more like this: World War II turned the strengths of his rural upbringing--his patience as a hunter, his skill as a marksman, his commitment to protecting his brothers-in-arms--into the makings of a tragedy and a source of shame. The psychological damage to him was permanent, only fermented and made more potent by his alcoholism and denial. Traumatized far beyond his own awareness of the damage, Alvin Straight lived out the next 40 years--his entire adult lifetime--as an abusive drunk who impregnated his wife fourteen times, injured one of his grandchildren through his negligence and caused four of them to be taken into the custody of the state, alienated his brother, and ended up living in near-isolation with his damaged, now childless daughter in a small, lonely, too-quiet house. This reconstruction, if even close to correct, makes new, more somber sense of Alvin's signature line (singled out by some critics as mawkish screenwriting): "The worst part of bein' old is remembering when you was young."

Seeing Alvin's journey as one of atonement rather than of forgiveness is the only way to make sense of its strange, self-imposed restrictions. Alvin won't accept an offered ride when his mower breaks down, and politely but obstinately refuses not once but three times to enter his benefactors' house even just to use their phone. (Like another old cowboy who almost killed one of his own, John Wayne's Ethan Edwards at the end of The Searchers, Alvin only stands in the doorway, denying himself the comforts of domestic civilization.) At night, camped out in their back yard, he watches wistfully as the lights go out in their windows. His trip is not just the necessary means of getting to his brother's house; it's an ordeal ritual, its rigors and privations rigidly maintained as a form of self-flagellation.

Alvin has undertaken this journey not just because his brother has had a stroke and may

not live much longer, but because he knows he's not going to live much longer himself. He tells his daughter the doctor said he was "gonna live to be a hundred," but this is far from the straight story. What the doctor told him was that his hips were going, he was in the early stages of emphysema, his circulation was failing, and his diet was bad. "If you don't make some changes quickly," he concluded, "there'll be some serious consequences." But it's pretty clear that Alvin Straight isn't going to be making any changes; he's petrified just looking at the medical equipment in the clinic, and insists that he's not going to pay for an operation, or have X-rays taken, or even use a walker. And for the rest of the film he keeps right on smoking his Swisher Sweets and eating raw wieners and Braunschweiger. He's a stubborn man, as he admits, stubborn even in self-destruction. Our glimpse of Alvin's unclothed body in the clinic--wrinkled, swollen, and sagging, speckled with prominent moles--is, finally, the thing itself, unveiled, that David Lynch has portrayed before in so many nightmarish versions, from the "baby" in Eraserhead to the piteously malformed Elephant Man to the spectacularly obese and pustulant Baron Harkonnen in Dune: all the horror and glory of imprisonment in flesh-the inevitability of age, disease, and dissolution.

Significantly, Alvin makes his pilgrimage in the autumn. He and his daughter listen to the far-off roar of a grain elevator the night he announces his intention to make the trip. "It's ... harvest time," she says. The agricultural machines we see in those sweeping aerial views are threshers and harvesters. Harvest is when the world begins to die around us, and it is also when we reap what we have sown. Alvin knows this trip will be his last long haul; his quest is not for his brother's redemption but for his own. On the last night of his journey, before finally rejoining Lyle, he sets his camp in a cemetery.

Pilgrimages are not fashioned as gifts to our earthly siblings; they are abasements of the soul before the almighty. (Maybe Alvin's chosen to make this offering to Lyle because, as he tells the bickering twins who repair his mower, "Your brother knows better than anyone else who you are and what you are.") And, although often prompted by premonitions of mortality and fired by sincere repentance, pilgrimages are not guaranteed success. The Straight Story begins and ends with an elegiac image of the starry sky--the same image that attends John Merrick's last sleep in The Elephant Man. But the stars are not an unambiguous image of serenity, of making peace with the past and coming to rest, as Alvin hopes to do. There's no divine grace or forgiveness in evidence for him, not even the vision of maternal tenderness granted the suffocating Merrick. Alvin's endlessly expanding starscape could just as easily signify vast emptiness and indifference, or the absurdity of human striving in the face of unsurpassable sublimity, or the profound gulf between human yearnings and any answering assurance. The point here is not to supply an answer to the open-ended question posed by this image, but to explicitly acknowledge that it remains open-ended.

When has there ever been an unambiguously happy ending in a Lynch film, anyway? When John Merrick is urged to stand up and acknowledge the applause of London society at the theater, how different is that from his being prodded with a stick and ordered to stand and exhibit himself for gawkers at the freak show? The image of his mother in the stars, "the face of an angel" assuring him that "nothing dies," is a beatific deathbed dream. Is normalcy really restored, and corruption fully exposed, in the idyllic denouement of Blue Velvet, when we see Jeffrey's father returned to good health and the two young lovers' families lunching together? And are we really supposed to accept at face value the intervention of Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, and the last-minute reconciliation of Sailor and Lula at the end of Wild at Heart? Lyle is obviously moved beyond words by Alvin's effort, but The Straight Story deliberately leaves uncertain whether he forgives his brother. Alvin's journey itself, and whatever hard-earned glimpses of earthly grace it may have given him--a replenishing thunderstorm over an Iowa cornfield, children waving from the back of a pickup truck, late afternoon sunlight flickering through autumn leaves-will have to have been enough.

Questions of forgiveness--whether it is possible and what it really means--are also raised by Alvin's relationship with Rose. At first the two seem naive and sweet--an eccentric, aging father-and-daughter couple living together and looking after each other. But in the light of the buried backstory, the history of betrayal and hurt between them, we might see instead a stunted and bereaved Cordelia alongside a middle-American Lear. Rose is spending her middle age caring for a father who lost her children to the state. Their life together does seem tender and innocent, but it's also lonely and terribly sad. Rose, her speech interrupted by abrupt glottal stops, seems just as withholding and unable to speak about the truth as Alvin. She occupies herself building bird houses, protective shelters for helpless creatures, and painting them with the same brightly colored trim we see on her own house. How are we to judge this household? Does it display heartwarming familial loyalty and forgiveness--an example of the sort of solidarity Alvin preaches--or pathetic codependency and denial? Lynch isn't saying.

In his essay on Lost Highway, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," collected in A Supposedly Fun Thing I' II Never Do Again, David Foster Wallace argues that Lynch has alienated both critics and audiences because he confounds the conventional, reassuring dichotomy between good and evil that most American films foist on us. Lynch's protagonists, he insists, are never just good or evil but always, discomfitingly, both. Just look back at them: the naive mechanic Pete in Lost Highway, menaced by his mistress's gangster boyfriend, is actually a jealous husband who's killed his wife; the angelic Laura Palmer in Fire Walk with Me is also a coke whore; the youthful rebels Lula and Sailor in Wild at Heart are in danger of becoming the corrupt elders they're trying to flee; the college-boy detective Jeffrey Beaumont in Blue Velvet is secretly as perverted and sadistic as the "sick" Frank

Booth. When Doctor Treves in The Elephant Man, who both helps and exploits poor deformed John Merrick, finally asks himself, "Am I a good man? Or a bad man?" there is, in answer, only a fade to black.

Alvin Straight, like Treves, is in the end one of Lynch's more self-aware protagonists--having come through the flames of his own anger and guilt, he knows what he is capable of. But in his heart he is no different from the rest of them. Yes, as we can see from everything he does and says, Alvin is at last what we like to think of as a "good" man, offering kindness and wisdom to the people he meets. But we also know, from what he has done before and cannot quite bring himself to say, that he's a son of a bitch. His "goodness" is not exactly a delusion, like Fred's, or naivete, like Jeffrey's, or hypocrisy, like Treves's; it's harder, more complicated, maybe more authentic--the kindness of a man who knows he is capable of great meanness, the wisdom that comes only from remorse over past recklessness, the knowledge that light is inseparable from shadow.

The Straight Story is genuinely poignant and moving, in a way that, say, Lost Highway certainly isn't. But to call the film "sentimental," or discontinuous with Lynch's previous work, is simply to misunderstand it. Far from abandoning grotesques and eerie atmospherics for a fantasy of some middle America where folks are just as honest and decent as they seem, David Lynch's portrait of crooked Alvin Straight, and of the many crooked miles he's traveled, reveals the deep psychological complexity--that "vanity and vexation of spirit"--in any human life, and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of attaining any sure atonement in it.

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